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# FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH

## Talking to Kids About School Related Worries

Being in school can bring up big worries for kids but talking about concerns and feeling supported can help. Here are some tips to make school conversations more productive and less stressful for everyone.

### Be realistic about challenges

Kids who've struggled in the past, especially those with learning, mental health, or social issues, often feel more anxious than excited about attending school. As a parent it's tempting to focus on the positive: "It's the fall semester, a new school year!"

But glossing over your child's challenges can leave them feeling unheard and be a missed opportunity to talk about what's really worrying them: What if I fail again? What if I can't do it? What if I must talk in front of the class?

Instead, acknowledge your child's struggles and be direct and strategic. Think about what's traditionally been difficult for your child: Social struggles? Test anxiety? Trouble following rules in class. Past troubles can provide a roadmap for future support. Give your child the chance to talk through any concerns: What if I'm terrible at math just like last year? What if they ask me to talk in front of the class again? And work together to brainstorm solutions.

"I remember how hard math was last year. But we know a lot more about what you need to do well now. When you're ready, let's make a plan!"  
"Let's talk to Mr. Smith and let him know you don't like being called up to the blackboard."  
Giving kids the opportunity to talk about what's worrying them can help you understand their

struggles and help them advocate for their needs.

### Take worries seriously!

Remember, issues that might seem silly to you can be very serious to your child. Worrying they aren't in classes with friends, seeing a former crush in the hall, finding out they have another class with a teacher who "Hates me!" — all of these can be sources of real stress.

Instead of brushing worries away, take care to validate kids' feelings and give them opportunities to talk about what's troubling them. Asking open-ended, non-judgmental questions can help kids open-up, and make it easier to share worries.

"I can't believe you are in 7th grade this year. How do you feel?"

"Are you excited about any of your classes?"

### Talk about the good stuff!

Anxiety can be consuming for kids, blocking out good memories and casting a dark cloud over the new year. But big, empty statements of encouragement ("I bet you'll love it!") can fall flat. Instead, try asking them about concrete things they've enjoyed in the past. Helping your child remember some of the good parts of school activities or classes they like, favorite teachers, friends they've missed over the summer can help fight negative thoughts and temper stress. Try encouraging kids to compare notes on topics like these:

What did they miss about school during a long break? Seeing friends? Getting the good cookies at lunch? Play rehearsals?

What are they looking forward to? Starting a new subject? Getting a break from time with parents. I mean let's face it, grownups can be tiring! Joining a team? Decorating their locker? Whatever it is, make sure to make it part of your school conversations.

Remember, the idea isn't to put on a song and dance about how amazing school will be. The goal is to help them focus more on facts about what they've enjoyed, and less on what-ifs about what could go wrong.

Don't push! Sometimes kids just don't want to talk. We all want our kids to feel supported and do well, but sometimes stepping back is the right thing to do. The goal should be to let your child know you're aware that this can be a stressful time, and you're there if they want to talk.

The urge to check in, even when your child isn't responding, might be more about your own anxieties than your child's needs. Try to manage your own expectations, and if your child isn't ready to talk or doesn't seem engaged with the conversation, that's okay. You'll have plenty of opportunities for conversations as the year goes on. For now, just knowing you're there, and that you love and support them, can be enough.

**"Go easy on yourself.  
Whatever you do today,  
let it be enough"**  
**-Unknown**



# Improving Kids' Executive Functioning Skills for a More Successful Year

## What is Executive Function?

Executive function is the cognitive process that organizes thoughts and activities, prioritizes tasks, manages time efficiently, and makes decisions.

Executive function skills help us establish structures and strategies for managing projects and determining the actions required to move each project forward. Individuals with executive dysfunction often struggle to analyze, plan, organize, schedule, and complete tasks on deadline, or at all. They misplace materials, prioritize the wrong things, and often tend to get overwhelmed by big projects.

## All About Executive Functioning Skills



## What Are the 7 Core Executive Function Skills?

We know what parts of the brain control executive functions, but what are they specifically? Broadly speaking, executive function refers to the cognitive or mental abilities that people need to pursue goals actively. In other words, it's about how we behave toward our future goals and what mental abilities we need to accomplish them.

The term is very closely related to self-regulation — executive functions are things you do to yourself, in order to change your behavior. By employing your executive functions effectively, you're hoping to change your future for the better.

Executive function is judged by the strength of these seven skills:

- 1 Self-awareness:** Simply put, this is self-directed attention.
- 2 Inhibition:** Also known as self-restraint.
- 3 Non-Verbal Working Memory:** The ability to hold things in your mind. Essentially, visual imagery — how well you can picture things mentally.
- 4 Verbal Working Memory:** Self-speech, or internal speech. Most people think of this as their "inner monologue."
- 5 Emotional Self-Regulation:** The ability to take the previous four executive functions and use them to manipulate your own emotional state. This means learning to use words, images, and your own self-awareness to process and alter how we feel about things.
- 6 Self-motivation:** How well you can motivate yourself to complete a task when there is no immediate external consequence.
- 7 Planning and Problem Solving:** Experts sometimes like to think of this as "self-play" how we play with information in our minds to come up with new ways of doing something. By taking things apart and recombining them in different ways, we're planning solutions to our problems.

# Anxiety Disorders

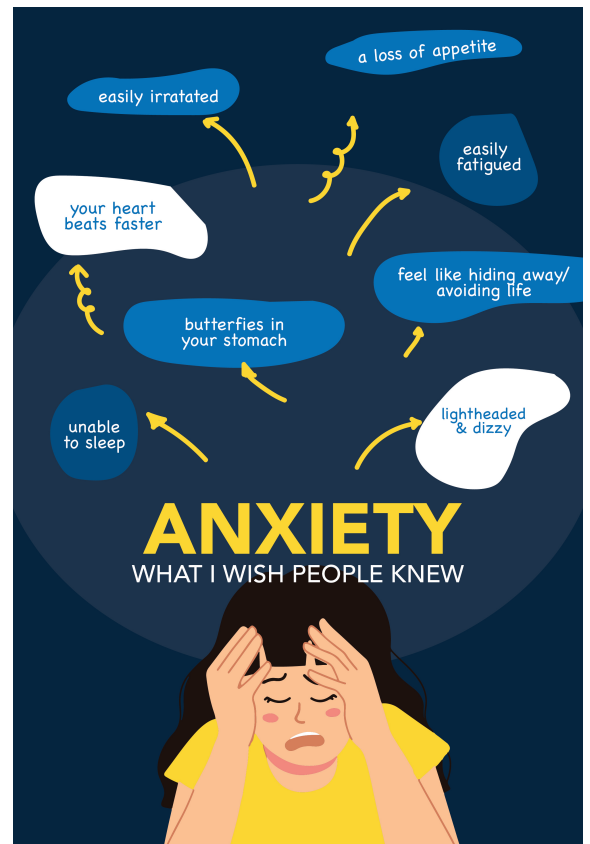
We all experience anxiety. For example, speaking in front of a group can make us anxious, but that anxiety also motivates us to prepare and practice. Driving in heavy traffic is another common source of anxiety, but it helps keep us alert and cautious to avoid accidents. However, when feelings of intense fear and distress become overwhelming and prevent us from doing everyday activities, an anxiety disorder may be the cause.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the United States. Over 40 million adults in the U.S. (19.1%) have an anxiety disorder. Meanwhile, approximately 7% of children aged 3-17 experience issues with anxiety each year. Most people develop symptoms before age 21.

## Why is Anxiety so Powerful?

Anxiety is there to keep us safe. It is a call to action to fight or flee so we can move through danger. It's there to keep us out of the way of trouble so the signals it sends must be strong. The problem is that those signals aren't always accurate. Anxiety is instinctive and automatic. It's been practicing its moves for thousands of years. That's the thing about evolution – and sometimes it works for us, sometimes it makes us vulnerable to anxiety.

Anxiety was never meant to get in our way, but rather, to get us out of the way of danger. The part of the brain that drives anxiety thinks it's doing the right thing. The more we fight it, the harder it will work to convince us that there's danger and that we need to act.



## 5 Ways to Deal With Anxiety

**1. Become a relaxation expert.** We all think we know how to relax. But chilling out in front of the TV or computer isn't true relaxation. The same is true for alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. They may seem to relieve anxiety or stress, but it's a false state of relaxation that's only temporary. What the body really needs is daily practice of a relaxation technique — like deep breathing, tai chi, or yoga — that has a physical effect on the mind. For example, deep breathing helps to relax a major nerve that runs from the diaphragm to the brain, sending a message to the entire body to let go and loosen up.

**2. Get enough sleep, nourishment, and exercise.** Want your mind and body to feel peaceful and strong enough to

handle life's ups and downs? Get the right amount of sleep for your needs — not too much or too little. Eat well: Choose fruit, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains for long-term energy (instead of the short bursts that come from too much sugar or caffeine). And exercise to send oxygen to every cell in the body so your brain and body can operate at their best.

**3. Connect with others.** Spend time with friends or family. Organized activities are great, but just hanging out works too. Doing things with those we feel close to deepens our bonds, allowing us to feel supported and secure. And the fun and sharing that go with it allow us to feel happier and less upset about things. If you feel worried or nervous about something, talking about it with someone who listens, and cares can help you

feel more understood and better able to cope. You'll be reminded that everyone has these feelings sometimes. You're not alone.

**4. Connect with nature.** Heading out for a walk in the park or a hike in the woods can help anyone feel peaceful and grounded. Walking, hiking, trail biking, or snowshoeing offer the additional benefit other physical activities. Invite a friend or two — or a family member — along and enjoy feeling connected to people as well.

**5. Pay attention to the good things.** A great way to keep our minds off the worry track is to focus our thoughts on things that are good, beautiful, and positive. Appreciate the small, everyday blessings. Allow yourself to dream, wish, and imagine the best that could happen.



# Anxiety in Children

Many children have fears and worries and may feel sad and hopeless from time to time. Strong fears may appear at different times during development. For example, toddlers are often very distressed about being away from their parents, even if they are safe and cared for. Although fears and worries are typical in children, persistent or extreme forms of fear and sadness could be due to anxiety or depression. Because the symptoms primarily involve thoughts and feelings, they are sometimes called internalizing disorders.

## Treatment for Anxiety

**The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider such as your child's primary care provider, or a mental health specialist, about getting an evaluation.**

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) recommends that healthcare providers routinely screen children for behavioral and mental health concerns. Some of the signs and symptoms of anxiety in children could be caused by other conditions, such as trauma. It is important to get a careful evaluation to get the best diagnosis and treatment. Consultation with a health provider can help determine if medication should be part of the treatment. A mental health professional can develop a therapy plan that works best for the child and family.

- Behavior therapy includes child therapy, family therapy, or a combination of both. The school can also be included in the treatment plan. For very young children, involving parents in treatment is key. Behavior therapy for anxiety may involve helping children cope with and manage anxiety symptoms while gradually exposing them to their fears and help them learn that bad things do not occur.

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy is one form of therapy that is used to treat anxiety or depression, particularly in older children. It helps the child change negative thoughts into more positive, effective ways of thinking, leading to more effective behavior.

## HOW CAN ADULTS SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY



ENCOURAGE  
AUTONOMY AND  
INDEPENDENCE



INTRODUCE  
WORRY TIME  
INTO YOUR  
STUDENTS DAY



TEACH STUDENTS  
ABOUT SELF-TALK AND  
HOW TO DEVELOP  
HELPFUL THINKING  
STRATEGIES



TEACH STUDENTS  
ABOUT THINKING  
ERRORS THEY  
ARE MAKING



CREATE A  
MENTAL HEALTH  
FRIENDLY  
CLASSROOM  
ENVIRONMENT



SUPPORT  
STUDENTS WITH  
IDENTIFYING  
THEIR TRIGGERS



HAVE A GOOD  
REFERRAL SYSTEM  
IN PLACE



LISTEN TO YOUR  
STUDENT  
BE PATIENT AND  
SUPPORTIVE



MAKE SURE  
STUDENTS ARE  
GETTING ENOUGH  
SLEEP



HELP STUDENTS  
TO FIND TIME  
TO RELAX



EDUCATE  
STUDENTS ABOUT  
ANXIETY AND  
HOW IT WORKS



HELP  
STUDENTS TO  
PROBLEM SOLVE  
EFFECTIVELY



PROVIDE  
STUDENTS WITH  
SOME SIMPLE  
SELF-CARE  
STRATEGIES



SUPPORT  
STUDENTS TO  
DEVELOP GOOD  
EATING HABITS



TEACH STUDENTS  
SOME RELAXATION  
SKILLS SUCH AS  
DEEP BREATHING  
OR PROGRESSIVE  
MUSCLE RELAXATION

### Managing Symptoms: Staying Healthy

Treatments can also include a variety of ways to help the child feel less stressed and be healthier like nutritious food, physical activity, sufficient sleep, predictable routines, and social support. Here are some healthy behaviors that can play a role in managing symptoms of anxiety:

- Having a healthy eating plan centered on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (for example, beans, peas, and lentils), lean protein sources, and nuts and seeds
- Participating in physical activity for at least 60 minutes each day
- Getting the recommended amount of sleep each night based on age
- Practicing mindfulness or relaxation techniques

### Prevention of anxiety

It is not known exactly why some children develop anxiety. Many factors may play a role, including biology and temperament. But it is also known that some children are more likely to develop anxiety when they experience trauma or stress, when they are maltreated, when they are bullied or rejected by other children, or when their own parents have anxiety. Although these factors appear to increase the risk for anxiety, there are ways to decrease the chance that children experience them.

# When Basic Strategies are Not Enough

Taking preventative measures, acknowledging a student's reaction to fears, and teaching coping skills are important pre-referral steps. As more incidences of student anxiety, experts warn against being dismissive of students' worries on the one hand or of overcompensating by removing triggers that contribute to the anxiety on the other. That's what not to do.

What should be done, however, often has adults perplexed. That's because anxiety symptoms and reactions vary from child to child. And intervention should be nuanced based on the intensity and longevity of the anxious behaviors. When someone is concerned about something like anxiety, we have to really work on connecting them to the appropriate intervention or services sooner rather than later. The outcomes are

better when we can intervene earlier. COVID-19 contributed to students' traumatic experiences, highlighting the need for educators to watch for warning signs for mental health challenges. It's important that educators refer students to receive services if they see signs of distress. We must prioritize students' well-being.

**Five approaches for adults to take in supporting students who are experiencing anxiety:**

## Put Effort Into Prevention

Adults can model positive techniques for coping with worry and stress. For example, a teacher could share with students that they are worried because they only have 30 minutes to teach a math lesson that typically takes 50 minutes. The teacher and students could then discuss potential solutions and reflect on that problem-solving exercise. The teacher can also recommend two other prevention techniques: gratitude journaling and ensuring time for making social connections. All adults should emphasize the importance of healthy habits for children, including good nutrition, ample exercise, and quality sleep.

## Understand When a Higher Level of Support is Needed

If a student's anxiety persists beyond six months and pre-referral interventions — such as teaching coping skills — do not help, it can be time for more intensive support. In addition, concerning behaviors like prolonged school avoidance or social withdrawal indicate it may be time for targeted interventions. Intervention approaches include therapeutic intervention, a diagnosis evaluation, a referral for Section 504 accommodations, or a special education evaluation. Mental health professionals can also identify any other psychological conditions.

## Celebrate Growth

When students overcome challenges, including a fear that stood in their way, adults should recognize their efforts. Overcoming fear is a powerful experience that can help students the next time they feel anxious about a task. When students overcome challenges, including a fear that stood in their way, adults should recognize their efforts. The treatment approach is about learning to tolerate some of the fear to overcome anxiety with a sense of control. So, students feel, "I battled back against it. I feel so much better. I'm in control of the anxiety!"

## Citations

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## Acknowledge the Student's Reaction to Anxiety

When a student is worried or anxious, educators should talk with the student and their parents about the student's fears. Schools are working hard to make sure that every child with anxiety is followed up on. We must listen to the students more and talk a little less in order to get a pulse on what they're experiencing and feeling. In addition to better understanding why a student is worried, adults can determine if the fear relates to a specific event or experience, such as exam week. That information can then be used to help the student develop coping strategies. Educators must take an empathetic approach and validate the feelings the student expresses. They should avoid approaches that focus on a student's weaknesses or what's wrong with the student. Instead, adults should focus on a student's strengths.

## Teach Coping Skills

Not all worries or all anxieties are a problem. In these cases, adults can help students understand that sometimes worries and fears are typical reactions to certain events, perhaps a big test or school performance.

When worries persist, it is helpful to have students list all their tasks, ranking them from the least scary to the scariest. Educators and parents can use this "fear ladder" approach to help students discuss how to accomplish the task, starting with the least scary approach. Then, when the student has met that goal, an adult can discuss how to build upon that success with approaches for other tasks that cause worry. Again, it's about listing the fears, recognizing which ones we will tackle, and developing ways to manage our physiological response.

Letting students avoid events they are anxious about is not recommended because that can reinforce the fear and prevent students from developing a healthy response to their fears.